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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

With this number the Christian News-Letter enters on its third year. Who, when it was launched, could have foreseen or imagined the events through which we have lived during the past two years—the collapse of France, the Nazi subjugation of Europe, the Battle of Britain, when our fate trembled in the balance, and all that is involved in the entrance of Russia into the war?

THE OUTER AND INNER WORLD

These prodigious convulsions are changing the whole course of human history, bringing into existence a new balance of vital forces, creating opportunities for some peoples and denying them to others. But far more fundamental and lasting than the changes in the external world is what is taking place in the inner life of man. How far can human personality survive the strains to which it is exposed? How is it being changed by such unprecedented experiences as those described, for example, in *Fighter Pilot*,[1] a young airman's story of his adventures, or by the experiences through which millions of youth of both sexes are passing in battles and vigils and services on land or sea? In what subtle and unperceived ways is human consciousness being transformed? When the storm subsides and men begin to recover from their stupor what new pattern of life will determine men's outlook? The answer to these questions will mean more for the future than the winning of battles.

To ask these questions is to come face to face with the ultimate religious issues of life. May we believe that God is directly present in every human experience, seeking man's salvation? If He is, out of the present agony some great good may be born. On this side of the dark valley all seems futility and death, but on the far side we may find salvation and new birth. It is not by any passive acceptance of fate, however, that salvation can be found, but only by an active wrestling with experience. The triumph of the human spirit over castastrophe can be won only at a high cost. The condition of re-birth is that we should face the whole of our experience without fear, in the confidence that God is the Ruler both of Darkness and of Light. In the active response to catastrophe there will be not only thought and act, but also an activity of waiting.

> "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
> Which shall be the darkness of God . . .
> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
> So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing."[2]

[1] Batsford, 6s.

[2] T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*, Faber and Faber, 1s.

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN ITALY

The October issue of *Blackfriars*,[1] the monthly review edited by the English Dominicans, contains an article on " Catholicism and the New Order in Italy," by D. A. Traversi, who on going down from Oxford a few years ago took a post in the British School, and later in the British Institute, in Rome and left the city a few days before Italy entered the war. The Fascist doctrine, formulated by Mussolini in the phrase, " everything within the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State," is wholly incompatible, the writer of the article clearly sees, with the Christian belief in God and in the value of the individual. This fundamental opposition, and not the outward signs of compromise, is the reality in Italy. Fascism abolishes the distinction between the two spheres of the spiritual and the temporal, between religion and politics, which has been one of the underlying assumptions of European thought for 1,500 years. For Fascism all education is essentially political ; it is a process by which the individual is absorbed into the State and conditioned to serve its purposes. Catholic teaching is provided for in the schools—Mussolini decided that it was easier to make use of the Church than to destroy it; but the formation of character and the integration of instruction are reserved to the Fascist Party. What prospect has Catholicism of withstanding this insidious assault ?

The article contains a warning against the sweeping assertion, commonly made that Italy is a Catholic country. The number of practising Catholics among the educated classes in Italy is astonishingly small; those professing some form of Christian belief in these classes is certainly less to-day than in England. The dangers which face the Church are apparent when we ask in what the Catholicism of Italy consists. The chief strength of the Church at present is perhaps the cumulative effect of centuries of Catholic teaching and experience upon the character of the Italian people. This makes itself felt, for example, in a tremendous devotion to the family, which binds its members in the closest ties of personal affection and makes almost impossible the absolute devotion to the State which Fascism demands. The Italian, perhaps more than any other European, thinks and acts in terms of personal relationship. But this national characteristic which Christianity has helped to form is not in itself strong enough to withstand Fascist penetration.

Social and historical reasons make it doubtful whether the foundations exist in Italy for a strong reaction against Fascism. The classes from whom it could come are very limited. The lower middle classes, the shop-keepers, the state functionaries and the professional classes are tied to the existing *regime* by bonds of social pretension and economic selfishness. The attitude of the workers depends on their economic status at any given moment. They, and still more the mass of the peasants, have relatively little political consciousness, though this is less true of the workers in the industrial towns of the north. The aristocracy suffers from a sense of its own superfluousness and has given its support to the Axis. There remains that small section of the middle class whose outlook was formed before 1922 by traditions, spiritual, intellectual and political, deriving from pre-Fascist days. Many of them, whether Catholics or Liberals of the Mazzini tradition, regard Mussolini's rule as uncivilised and degraded. But their number and influence are strictly limited—partly by restrictions imposed on them by the Fascists, and partly by their traditional tendency to regard politics as a sphere reserved for the unscrupulous.

The modern history of Italy has contributed to the same end. The national consciousness took shape, all though the last century, in separation from Catholic influences. Italian unity was achieved, generally speaking, *in spite of* the Church. This history has led many patriotic Italians to believe that the Church was irreconcileably opposed to their national existence, and this opinion has had lasting effects on Italian politics. Even more important, perhaps, is the susceptibility (due largely to the same influences) of the bulk of the Italian middle classes to materialist and positivist prejudices. This is an influence which penetrates every corner of the middle-class outlook. Nothing will impress the mind

[1] Blackwell, Oxford. 1s. Annual Subscriptions, 12s. 6d. post free.

of the average, half-educated Italian as much as a "scientific," mechanistic demonstration.

The isolation of Catholicism and the power of materialism are among the chief hindrances to the mission of the Church in modern Italy. But the most direct obstacle is the universal presence of Fascism. The Fascists are able to dominate Italian life by making it almost impossible to live outside the system. Security depends on possession of the party membership card. Most insidious of all is the complete control of news and propaganda by the Party, which takes charge of the child at the age of six and never leaves him thereafter, presenting him continuously with a coherent but false picture of the world. To find the means of breaking this predetermined chain is the greatest task the Church has to face at the present moment.

A DECISION IN REGARD TO THE CHURCH

Among the friends whom the News-Letter has brought me is a layman who, after years of vigorous activity in the secular sphere, has decided in middle life to offer himself for ordination. He has told me in a letter of the reasons for his decision. This seems to me to come so near to the heart of the present religious situation that I have sought and obtained his permission to share it with the readers of the News-Letter.

"I have been increasingly conscious during the past decade, and, in particular, during the past year of crisis, of an impulsion of spirit, like the under tow of a tide, back to the Church, in spite of an unabating impatience with the sterility, ' stuffiness ' and mere conservatism which I find in the contemporary Church of England. If I am candid with myself I know that this impulsion is something beyond reason. It is something stronger than my will and indifferent to the judgments of my mind. In this I do not really decide; I am decided. Yet I cannot rest till I have comprehended and justified to my mind this movement of spirit. And rightly so, for I move towards a profession of closest communion with the Church which demands an absolute and irrevocable loyalty to her and I dare not leave any area of consciousness outside that allegiance.

" I believe that our Church is, in the main, a dead Church; that it cleaves to the security and comfort of its coherence with a dying order of society, the self-centred individualism and mammon-worship of nineteenth-century civilisation with its iniquitous doctrines of the ' profit motive,' ' laissez-faire ' and the ' skin-game ' of competition; that it all too often preaches an emasculated pietism, and shirks the fact that it has now no spiritual dynamic to offer to modern man; that it is, in the main, a compromising pseudo-Christianity. Its 'professionalism,' its mere ' churchiness ' sicken me, and the typical ' parson ' and his utterance and attitude fill me with despair. That is to underline the repulsion and, for this purpose, to discount the compensating beauty, holiness and devotion which the Church so evidently also contains. And I am assured that this repulsion is not evil but, in itself, good. Finally, if I am honest with myself, I must confess that I do not see the first shoots, in this Church of England, of that resurrection of Christianity which I know, none the less, to be at the birth. It seems to me far more probable that such a rebirth will come from the ' Gentile ' world, from India or from Russia, than from the Church of England. I believe that those who ally themselves with the Church of England to-day ally themselves with death and go down in spirit into a grave of the spirit.

" Why then, in face of such a repulsion and such a conviction am I more and more drawn into an ever-closer identification with this Church ? For years I have stood outside her walls, a critical and ' free-lance ' Christian, and I know well enough that to identify myself with her is, to some extent, to submit to be muzzled by the loyalty and discipline which she has the right to expect from her sons, and to make suspect my own testimony to Christ.

What then are the real dominating reasons and intuitions which draw me back? First, an ever-growing sense of the value of tradition and rootedness in life. All we know of truth is conveyed to us via our tradition and we cannot really divest our truth from our tradition. Where the truths of the spirit are concerned the vehicle of that tradition is the Church. We believe in a Christ and a Christianity which we can only apprehend at all through the medium of the Church. The very gospels are the word of the Church ; in the last resort we believe because our mother, the Church, has told us so. If we deny Christ we deny the Church who is, for men, the mother of our Christianity; if we deny the Church we deny Christ.

" But the Church speaks with many voices and in many dialects. To ignore nationalism is as futile a fallacy in religion as in politics. Therefore the Church of one's native tradition is, for any religious realism, one's own mother Church, that Church which tells the Christian truth in the terms of man's own idiom, dialect and tradition. Dialect and a realistic Christian dialectic are of one woof. We do not contend that our native language is the sole or the final mode of human expression; yet it is in that tongue alone that our apprehensions can really come home to us. So the liturgy, tradition and uses of our native Church are no final or exclusive vehicle of Christianity; but they are our own mother-medium in which alone we can fully comprehend it. Therefore, unless we conceive her to be utterly in error, as we pay our patriotism to our country so it is to our native Church that our piety is primarily due. A true piety requires loyalty to our native Church certainly no less than to our native country. And in time of stress and peril that due is a double due.

" Again, it is only within the pattern of life that true personality can flower; for personality does not and cannot evolve its own pattern; it is a ' mask ' or mirror of the pattern of Being. And it is the property of Being to beget an infinite variety of unique and individual patterns. Such a pattern is native tradition and a native Church and it is only within our own pattern of Being that our personalities can come to fruition. If we reject our own pattern we cut off our own roots; it is the fatal fallacy of an exaggerated and self-centred individualism. His own Church is, for the Christian, his own community-pattern and outside that pattern he is an outlaw and exile.

" Again, with the irresistible collectivism of modern life, the day of the individualist and ' free-lance ' is done. It is only within the communal structures of Church and State that the individual can find either freedom or effective action. The whole tendency of modern life is towards communal and away from individualised life, and, for the Christian, even though his Church may seem to offer the mere dead skeleton of community, *there*, nevertheless, is the structure and pattern of his own spiritual community.

" Finally, if identification with the Church to-day may seem to be identification with death it is to such a dying that all real Christianity calls, and it is only from such a death that resurrection is to be expected. If Christians are thus called to go down to the grave their place is in the tomb of their fathers. But the tomb, when the Spirit moves, is wont to become a womb. Return to mother-Church may, indeed, be that which psychology calls a return to womb-life —and it may be that it is precisely for such a return that our crisis calls. He who hears and obeys this call of a Church dying and distressed may say with Socrates to those who wonder: ' The time has come to go away. I go to die, and you to live; but which of us goes to the better lot is known to none but God.' "

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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